

## Catch the LCSR Spirit! The Lynchburg College Symposium Readings (LCSR) and Senior Symposium Program *Peggy Pittas, Ph. D.*

Each year faculty members and their students “Catch the LCSR Spirit” as they come together to learn from each other. For those who are involved in the Senior Symposium (SS) and Lynchburg College Symposium Readings (LCSR) Program, teaching and learning has become what Lee Schulman, President of the Carnegie Foundation, calls “community property.” An approach to curricular reform, such as the LCSR Program, necessitates implementation of integrative teaching techniques as instructors rethink their approaches to teaching. For many, these programs have meant giving up control and making the classroom more student-centered. Students must become more actively engaged in the classroom, sharing their thoughts and learning from each other.

Lynchburg College’s mission statement affirms that the College “offers distinctive undergraduate and graduate programs that reflect its commitment to teaching [and] scholarship....” To this end, the College “endeavors to create a learning environment that develops the breadth and knowledge and other characteristics traditionally associated with liberal education...” (*Undergraduate Catalogue*, 17). The LCSR Program’s primary goals are to foster an appreciation of the connection between basic skills and interdisciplinary knowledge and to promote greater cross-disciplinary communication among faculty and students. The LCSR/Senior Symposium mission is to foster interdisciplinary study by all students, so that they read from texts of classic and modern significance, and write and speak about them in the context of contemporary society.

In 1976, the College developed the Senior Symposium, a two-hour course required of all graduating seniors to address the fragmentation of general education. Students in all sections meet together on Mondays to hear public lectures given by invited guest speakers. On Wednesdays, they meet in small groups to discuss the presentations and associated readings, which are assigned from the *Lynchburg College Symposium Readings*, the College’s ten-volume set of readings developed by faculty members specifically for the SS/LCSR Program.

When Senior Symposium students found the texts difficult to read because many of them seldom had opportunity to read primary texts in previous courses, a faculty group led by Dr. Michael Santos, Professor of History, and Dr. James Huston, Dean of the College, studied these concerns. Initially, some members wanted a system for students to encounter the texts in the Senior Symposium readings before the senior year. Others wanted a system for encouraging reading, critical thinking, writing, and speaking across the curriculum. These two concepts were merged to become the Lynchburg College Symposium Readings (LCSR) Program.

The LCSR Program is an innovative approach which integrates selections from classic works to supplement regular class material. The LCSR Program encourages student participation in reading, writing, critical thinking, and speaking activities across the curriculum based on these readings. An “LCSR course” is a regular Lynchburg College course in which at least twenty percent of the grade is based on written and oral communication related to reading assignments from the *Lynchburg College Symposium Readings*.

Today, evidence of systematic change in teaching effectiveness and sustained faculty commitment to the program is strong. In 2003-2004, more than 62% of all full-time faculty members and 52% of all part-

time faculty members had completed the required pre-service workshop at some time during their tenure at Lynchburg College. A most important feature of the LCSR program is that offering a course is voluntary on the part of faculty members. Except for the required Senior Symposium, students are not required to enroll in a specific number of LCSR courses for graduation. In 2004-2005, the Program is reaching 3,140 student enrollees in 144 courses taught by 42 faculty members. Clearly this program impacts the College's academic program dramatically.

Each semester, students are surveyed concerning their perceptions of the value of the program. Students' comments on surveys in the LCSR courses indicate that they have improved their skills in writing and critical thinking, that they have achieved greater knowledge of the classics and have had more exposure to great literature, and that their education is more well rounded. In the fall 2003 and spring 2004 semesters, students reported that more oral assignments were used in their LCSR courses, that the LCSR readings, classroom discussions, and class assignments gave them greater opportunities to think critically about issues important to society today, and that LCSR as compared to non-LCSR courses gave them greater opportunities to write and speak in the classroom.

The SS/LCSR Program has impacted the academic community both on and beyond the Lynchburg College campus. Professor Richard Marius from Harvard University's writing center came to the campus to review the program for the Fund for Improvement of Post Secondary Education (FIPSE) grant that supported the program during its first three years of operation. In his review he says, "I have seldom in my life been so impressed by an innovation in college education. I suppose the highest compliment that I could pay to the program was that I wished I could teach in it" (Marius 1990). Mr. Don Boileau of George Mason University's communication studies department writes, "What I discovered was a sound program that not only enriches the education of students at Lynchburg College, but what I hope can be a model for many other colleges and universities throughout our country" (Boileau 1990). And there is evidence that this has happened.

In spring 2003, in an article titled, "Whither the Great Books?", Dr. William Casement describes the LCSR program as the "most fully organized version" of the recent growth of great-books programs that employs an "across-the-disciplines structure" (43). According to him, this approach perhaps encourages the use of the great books across the curriculum in ways that are less isolating, even more so than interdisciplinary programs. The SS/LCSR program is often included in research studies by faculty from other institutions as well. The latest study was in 2004 when the Senior Symposium was included in a comparative study, "Survey of Multi-section, Trans-disciplinary Courses with a Common Syllabus," supported by the Carnegie Foundation for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, Wabash College, and the Center of Inquiry into the Liberal Arts (CILA). The report is available at the website for Center of Inquiry into the Liberal Arts (CILA).

The SS/LCSR Program has received national acclaim in such publications as Loren Pope's *Colleges That Change Lives*, published in 1996 by Penguin Books, and in Charles Sykes and Brad Miner's *The National Review College Guide, America's 50 Top Liberal Arts Schools*, published in 1991 by Wolgemuth and Hyatt. The Templeton Foundation includes Lynchburg College among its schools that promote character development. In all of these citations, the Senior Symposium and the LCSR program are listed among the top reasons for selecting Lynchburg College.

The *Lynchburg College Symposium Readings* series is now undergoing a third revision, which will take at least five years to complete. As with previous editions, a revised edition offers us opportunities for revitalization, as readings are added or deleted based on student and faculty suggestions. As of 2005, three volumes are now published in cooperation with XLibris Corporation with seven others at different

stages of pre-publication. Now in its fourteenth year, the *Agora*, the only known annual publication of undergraduate academic prose writing, recognizes and publishes student responses to the LCSR readings.

The program's influence is persuasive because it quietly pervades the campus community, supporting the work and scholarship of the faculty. The reader of this issue of the *Agora* is invited to "Catch the LCSR Spirit" with us!

#### Works Cited

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